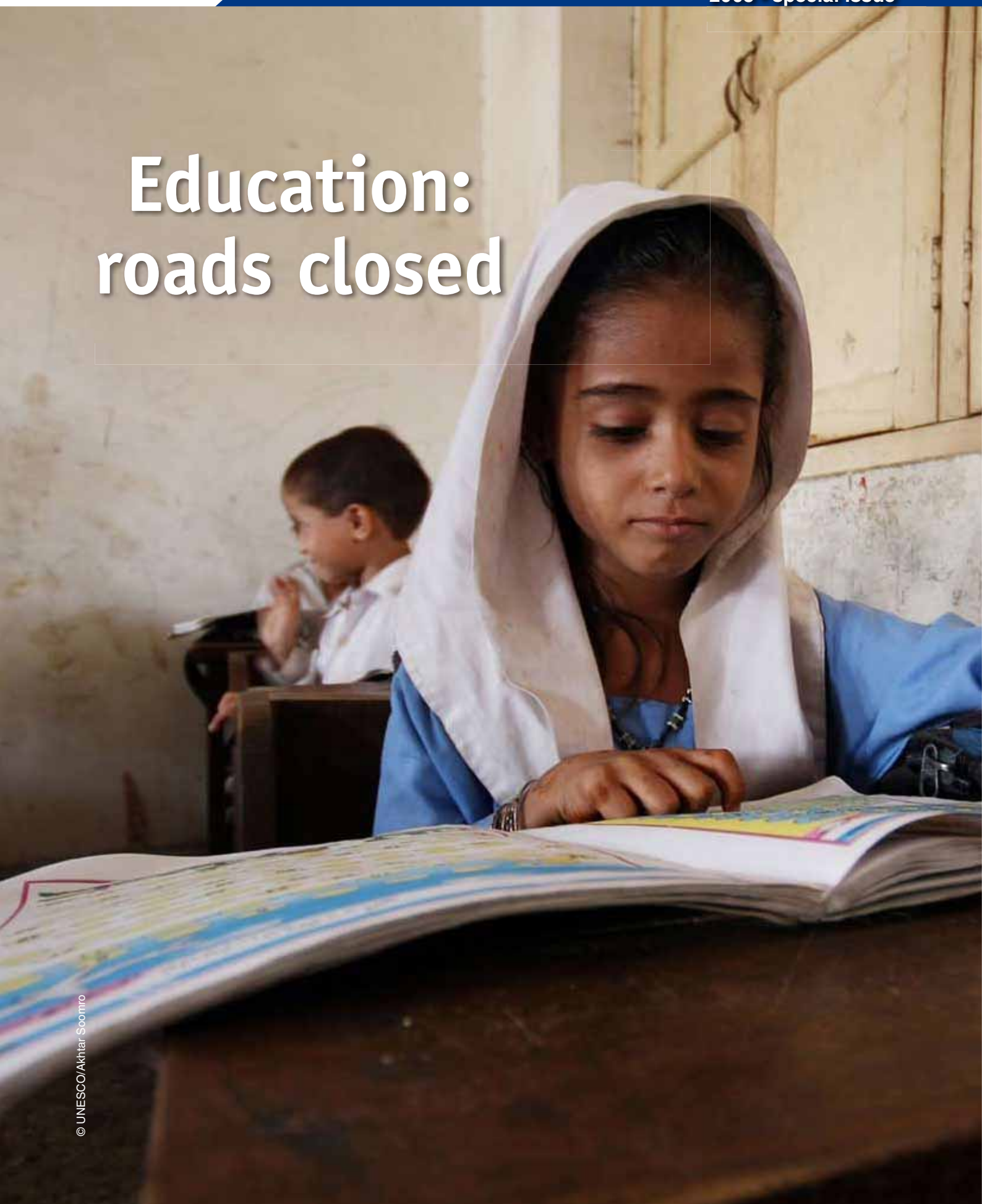
United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

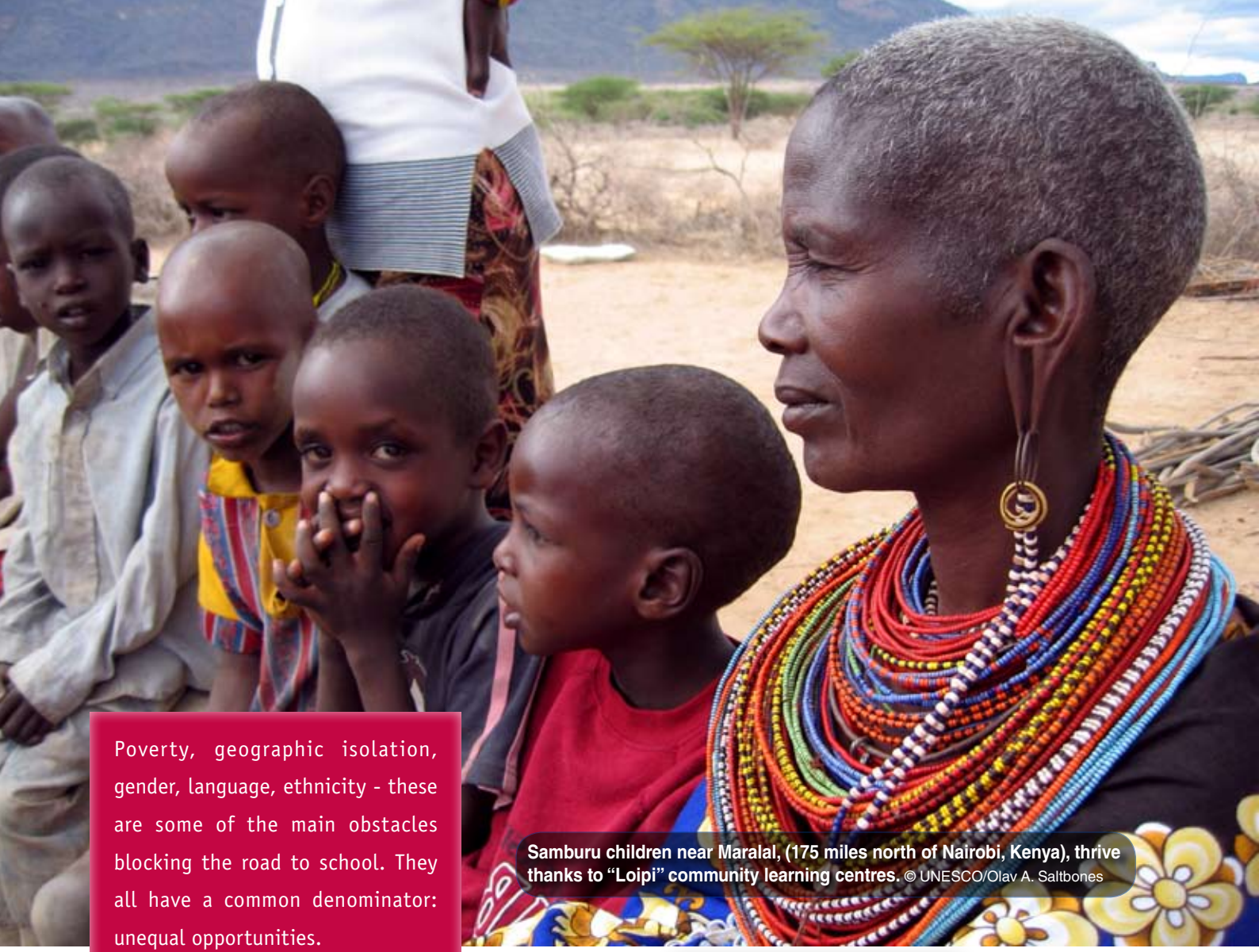
the UNESCO Courier

2008 • special issue

# Education: roads closed



© UNESCO/Akhtar Soomro



Samburu children near Maralal, (175 miles north of Nairobi, Kenya), thrive thanks to "Loipi" community learning centres. © UNESCO/Olav A. Saltbones

Poverty, geographic isolation, gender, language, ethnicity - these are some of the main obstacles blocking the road to school. They all have a common denominator: unequal opportunities.

If we continue to turn a blind eye to the glaring inequalities that still persist in education, then the goals set by the international community will not be met, and, in some cases, on a spectacular scale, according to the 2009 Global Monitoring Report on Education for All, which was presented in Geneva (Switzerland) on 25 November. Millions of children throughout the world risk seeing themselves condemned to live in poverty, with limited horizons.

This UNESCO Courier dossier takes a closer look at some examples.

## Contents


Education: roads closed . . . . . 1

Education: the other global emergency . . . . . 3

Public support for education in Ecuador . . . . . 5

Scholarships make children hopeful . . . . . 7

Illiteracy: impossible to hide . . . . . 9

Inequality undermining education opportunities for millions of children . . . . . 11

# EDUCATION: THE OTHER GLOBAL EMERGENCY

The Global Monitoring Report Team

**Western countries have pulled together multi-billion-dollar plans to save their banking systems from catastrophe. The same determination, says the 2009 Education for All Global Monitoring Report, Overcoming inequality: why governance matters, is needed to tackle failing education systems.**

These are "extraordinary times". In just a matter of weeks, several western countries have pulled together multi-billion-dollar bailout packages for their ailing banking systems, thus keeping the wheels of the global economy in motion. Without question, political leaders needed to act decisively and act now or risk catastrophic financial implications.

The same determination, says the 2009 Education for All Global Monitoring Report, Overcoming inequality: why governance matters, is now needed to tackle an equally serious and no less urgent development challenge – that of ensuring social justice, fairness and the right to educational opportunity for the world's most vulnerable population groups.

"When financial systems fail, the consequences are highly visible and governments act," UNESCO's Director General Koïchiro Maatsura has commented. Yet "...when education systems fail the consequences are...no less real. Unequal opportunities for education fuel poverty, hunger, and child mortality and reduce prospects for economic growth."

The extent of global inequality in educational opportunity should give policymakers pause for thought. While over a third of children in rich countries complete university, a much smaller share even completes primary education in much of sub-Saharan Africa (with just 5% reaching university level). One in three children in developing countries (193 million in total) reach primary school age suffering from malnutrition and impaired cognitive growth – a figure that rises to over 40% in parts of South Asia.

National disparities mirror global inequalities. In Peru and the Philippines, children in the poorest 20% of the population receive 5 years less education than their peers from the wealthiest families. But wealth is not the only marker for marginalization and disadvantage. Other deeply entrenched barriers result from geographical accessibility to schooling, gender, language and ethnicity. In Senegal, for example, children in urban areas are twice as likely to be in school as those living in rural areas.

The picture, of course, is not all bleak and this year's Global Monitoring Report highlights some impressive national and regional performances. Tanzania and Ethiopia have both reduced the number of children out of school by over 3 million. In a region marked by deep gender inequalities, Bangladesh now has as many girls as boys reaching secondary school. In Latin America, several countries are enrolling and keeping more children in schools through innovative cash transfer programmes for the poorest households, • • •

**Oportunidades is the prinicipal anti-poverty program of the Mexican government.** © UNESCO/José Gabriel Ruiz Lembo

• • • with payments made conditional on school attendance and health visits. Most remarkably, Mexico's Oportunidades programme, one of the country's largest education schemes, is now being pilot tested in the New York City school system.

Nevertheless, the overall figures speak for themselves. An estimated 75 million children of primary school age world wide are currently out of school with partial projections suggesting that at least 29 million children will still be missing out on their right to an education in 2015. A further 776 million adults, or 16% of the world's population, lack even basic literacy skills. Two-thirds of these are women.



Without concerted and sustained action, the international development target of universal primary education by 2015 will move even further out of reach.

More of the same will simply not do.

That is why the way in which education systems are managed, policies developed, and resources allocated is in the political spotlight. 'Good governance' has become a rallying call, with decentralisation, the devolution of authority to parents and schools, and choice and competition recurrent themes in policy debates. But according to the Global Monitoring Report, governance reforms all too often fail to tackle the inequalities that are holding back education for all.

Wide sweeping education reforms that give but a passing nod to local context, institutional capacity requirements and equity-related issues are not reaching the levels of impact desired. In fact the evidence shows that applying education blueprints uncritically from the north, a practice frequently encouraged by the development community, will not lead to long term improvements in areas such as education resource allocation, school management and teacher recruitment.

A perfect example relates to reforms surrounding the decentralization of national education systems in developing countries. In the 1990s, such reforms undoubtedly brought education planning closer to school communities around the world. However at a time when many countries were coping with a massive expansion in education provision, financial decentralisation left different regions with even less resources to fund learning resources, school maintenance and the teaching profession. And while central and local governments supported the idea of devolving authority and decision-making to parents, schools and communities, especially those lacking voice in the poorest communities, they did not back this drive with measures to facilitate real participation.

Neither have competition—and its corollary, choice—proved to be the antidote for the failings of public education systems, as many expected. Even in the United States, where the private and civil society sectors have been contracted into the management of public school systems under various forms of public-private partnership, the gains to efficiency and education performance from the creation of charter schools, for example, have been uneven and remain inconclusive.

**North Westminster School, United Kingdom.** © UNESCO/Niamh Burke

In this year's Global Monitoring Report, we especially take the aid community to task for its "collective failure" to deliver on development commitments. Many countries' aid disbursements to basic education have stagnated since 2004. While countries such as the Netherlands and the United Kingdom still allocate over 60% of their aid to basic education in low-income countries, • • •

continued on page 11

# Public support for education in Ecuador

**A public sector programme being implemented in Ecuador, where families are given cash to send their children to school, has led to a noticeable increase in attendance, while reducing child labour.**

**Paulina Rivadeneira,**
*journalist with Diario Hoy (Ecuador)*

**Luis Guamán and Dolores Isama with a BDH officer.** © Paulina Rivadeneira

"I've often thought about taking my children out of school," admits Luis Guamán, who earns the equivalent of US$3 a day as a construction worker, "but thanks to the school voucher, they can carry on learning." This 30-year-old, who recently arrived from Imbabura, in the north of Ecuador, went to the offices of the state-run Social Protection Programme, looking for information about the Human Development Voucher (BDH). "They told me to come to the capital (Quito) for help," he explains, looking tired after his two-hour journey. He has come with his 27-year-old wife, Dolores Isama, and papers to prove he qualifies for the Voucher. His family is one of the 1,303,318 households (October 2008 figures) considered by the Ecuadorian government as among the country's 40% poorest. "Thanks to this help, my children can continue to go to school," says Dolores, a housewife with three children aged eight, four and three years. "I want them to have a full education." Like her, 78% of those receiving the BDH are mothers, and many are also head of the household.

The BDH is a cash allowance set up in 1999 under the name of "Solidarity Voucher." Unlike similar programmes in other countries in Latin America, there were no strings attached. In the beginning, to qualify for the US$30 per month allowance, parents did not have to prove they were sending their children to school, or had passed a medical examination. According to the World Bank, though, a number of beneficiaries of the BDH voluntarily applied these conditions. According to a 2006 impact assessment, the BDH scheme has led to a 17-point increase in schooling and a 10-point reduction in child labour.

A new impact assessment is just being prepared, but Ecuador's Minister for Economic and Social Integration, Jeannette Sánchez, already expects the BDH to show "a significant qualitative leap" this year. "We are currently changing an assistance programme into one of economic protection and integration," she says. The main changes, she points out, are an increase in the allowance to US$30 a month, applied since she took office, and, especially, encouraging beneficiaries to take joint responsibility for the scheme's implementation.

"Joint responsibility means asking mothers to look after the education and health of their children," explains Jeannette Sánchez. "In other words, that they use part of the Voucher to pay for these expenses." To ensure that the money is being well spent, the government has recently carried out sample checks in three provinces: Napo and Pastaza (in Amazonia) and Carchi (in the mountainous region to the north of the country). "The population in these provinces is spread out and health and education are precarious," explains David Alomía, an economist and director of the body responsible for overseeing the Voucher under the ministry.

He explains that the education and health controls in these three provinces looked at 1026 and 2054 households, respectively. The study showed that 218 families did not present evidence of school attendance or care for their children under 18 years of age, that 242 mothers • • •

**The Social Protection Programme office receives those qualifying for the Voucher. There are 22 offices like this one in the country.** © Paulina Rivadeneira

• • • did not have certificates to show that their infants (under one year old) had attended a health clinic (six consultations a year) and that 1999 mothers had not carried out the required health check-ups for their children aged between one and five (one consultation every six months).

Although the latter figure seems alarming, David Alomía says that this is a general problem, affecting most Ecuadorians, regardless of their socio-economic situation. "We have no culture of prevention. If a child seems healthy, no one thinks of sending him to see a doctor." When an irregularity is noticed, mothers are notified that they have 45 days to present a certificate. "It is likely that the school or health centre is too far from their home. But if the family is in the wrong, the allowance is suspended until they provide the required proof," he explains, emphasising that this is not a sanction. "We wouldn't want to penalise a population that, until now, has already been excluded. Our aim is to raise their awareness of the importance of investing in education and health."

Ligia Hernández, 37, has been receiving the Voucher for five years and has already seen its benefits. The wages of her farmer husband – US$7 a day – are too low to send their four children, aged 11, 10, 7 and 5 years, to school. "We use the Voucher to pay for food and school fees. Without it, the children could not all go to school," she says, handing a Social Protection Programme worker the documents to show that she had fulfilled her joint responsibility commitment - education, care, medical exam and vaccination certificates.

## State involvement

Explaining that the verification campaign is now extending to cover the entire country, David Alomía recognises that the state also has its obligations of joint responsibility: "When we find ourselves faced with new situations in terms of education and health care – a lack of centres, access problems, or complaints about the services provided – we pass on the reports to the Ministries of Health and Education. Once this campaign is over, we will have a detailed national picture of the social situation."

In 2008, the programme's budget was almost US$408 million - US$48 million more than the previous year. Given the global economic crisis, it is difficult to predict what the BDH budget will be for 2009, but Ecuador's President, Rafael Correa, has suggested it should be increased.

Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona, an independent expert on human rights and poverty for the United Nations, became particularly interested in the BDH scheme during a visit to Ecuador from 10 to 14 November. She says that the programme has grown, covering a wider area, while the allowances have increased. However, she cautions that more efforts will be needed to enable families receiving the BDH to escape poverty and destitution, especially given that almost 38% of the Ecuadorian population lives in poverty and 12% in extreme poverty. Even if the State has increased its social sector spending, she says, "progress has only been partial and Ecuador is still significantly lagging behind." ■

**Luis Guamán and Dolores Isama with a BDH officer.** © Paulina Rivadeneira

# Scholarships Make Children Hopeful

**Nepal's innovative programme to expand primary education has proven successful. More than 1.7 million children get government support in the form of a scholarship so they can go to school... and get an education that improves their daily life.**

**Dewan Rai,**
*reporter at the Nepali Times*

**Shusmita on her way home from school.** © Dewan Rai

Seventh grader Shusmita Bishwakarma already knows she wants to become a doctor. Not so long ago, she thought it was too good a dream to be true. But now she gets a scholarship, she can go to school... a good start to fulfilling her dream.

Shusmita is poor. Her parents moved to the Kathmandu valley 10 years ago, to escape the hardship of rural life and rising insurgency. Both work in a carpet factory 18 hours a day while she stays home to help with the cooking and the household chores. But Shusmita also goes to school. "I feel lucky because not all girls get the same opportunity as me," she says.

Shusmita is one of 847,412 Dalit children who receive financial help to get an education. The Nepalese government started the Dalit scholarship programme in 2001 to improve the literacy rate in the Dalit community, a low-caste group to which 13 percent of the Nepalese population belong.

Shusmita and the other Dalit children of the neighbourhood attend Kanti Bhairab Secondary School in Dachi, on the outskirts of Kathmandu. Thanks to the scholarship programme, the school has had a significant increase in girls' and minority students' enrolment: today, 60 percent of the students are girls, and 65 percent are from the Dalit and the Janajati communities.

Although fewer scholarships are available to older students- only 10 percent of secondary school students get financial help- the programme has been a success. Bal Krishna Shrestha, the assistant headmaster at Kanti Bhairab, says the enrolment rate has jumped by 10% this year. "Some parents even pulled out their children from boarding schools and put them in our school," he says.

Shrestha adds that the scholarship initiative has driven down the drop-out rate, which is usually high among poor girls who often have to look after their siblings or work in the fields with their parents.

## Expanding primary education with scholarships

In the past few years, Nepal has made education a priority. The government, in close partnership with the school districts, sponsors several scholarships programme that make school more affordable to low-caste groups, low-income families and orphans. In the remote, mountainous zone of Karnali for instance, almost all girls from grade 1 to 10 receive a scholarship.

The scholarship programmes also seek to reduce gender disparity at school. "The government is working with local organizations to campaign for girls' education. • • •

**In the past few years, Nepal has made education a priority.** © Manoj Shrestha

• • • The campaigners visit door to door to explain to families why girls should go to school," says Surendra Acharya, the section officer at the Department of Education.

So far, the initiative has been very successful. According to UNESCO's Global Monitoring Report on Education (2009), primary school enrolment increased by 15 percent between 1999 and 2004, and school dropout went down by 42 percent.

Overall, 75 percent of all primary school girls get some financial aid. In addition, the government provides hostel accommodation for 400 girls who would otherwise live too far from school.

The scholarship amounts vary, depending on the grade and location. They range between 450 and 1400 rupees per year, and are intended to cover uniform and stationary expenses, and possibly tuition fees. However, the children seldom get the amount they are entitled to.

## A system yet to be perfected

The major problem of the scholarship programme is that schools do not gather the students' information on time. By the time they receive the scholarship money, the number of registered students may have changed. In Masta Baidhyanath Primary School in Dadheldhura, for example, the number of registered students suddenly increased from 25 to 31. "We decided to divide the amount among all 31 students," says the school headmaster Durga Upreti.

Another problem is that the scholarship money is disbursed only at the end of the session. "How can they buy their uniform and stationeries if they get the money at the end of academic year?" Shrestha says. "Those who do not visit the district education office and wrangle over the money get nothing."

A most valuable aid to students is free textbooks. All girls in primary school can get their textbooks for free, but the government has not been able to deliver them to all the districts. This year, only 14 districts out of 75 received at least 80 percent of their load.

"It is not possible with the government programme alone, we are also getting help from local trusts and organizations," Shrestha says.

Those difficulties don't make it easy for all to attend school on a regular basis. At Beg Lal Primary School in the Morang district, where the majority of students are Dalits, the dropout rate is on the rise. "The amount of scholarship offered was too little to attract them," says school teacher Krishna Hari Ghimire. ■

**Shusmita in class.** © Dewan Rai

# Illiteracy: impossible to hide

**According to the latest UNESCO global report on education, more and more people know how to read and write, but 776 million adults are still illiterate. This phenomenon affects industrialized countries, where a minority of the population faces daily difficulties.**

**Luc Cédelle,**
*French journalist at the newspaper Le Monde*

Someone in the street, on public transport or in a shopping centre, asks for directions, although everything is clearly indicated on signs. He or she seems absent-minded, very tired, or exasperated by contradictory information. Sometimes those asked for information think nothing of it. Other times, they understand: this person does not know how to read, and is making an incredible effort to hide it.

**Literacy classes for immigrant workers in Bobigny (France).** © UNESCO/Michel Ravassard



## Talking about illiteracy

Terminology varies. In 1958, UNESCO declared that an illiterate person was someone who could not "both read and write a short simple statement on his [or her] everyday life". Twenty years later, UNESCO introduced the more refined concept of "functional" illiteracy, designating the inability to "read, write and calculate for his or her own and the community's development". Up to the 1980s, industrialized countries believed that they had eradicated the phenomenon. It was thought only migrants who had come from countries without compulsory schooling lacked mastery of the written word. This was an illusion, which technical progress has helped to dispel.

The growing scarcity of purely "manual" activities has revealed that a minority of the populations of developed countries lack basic written communication skills. There then emerged in France the new word «illetrisme» (illiteracy), as opposed to formerly used "analphabetisme" (analphabetism), the idea being to distinguish between "analphabetic", having never been to school, and "illiterate", having learnt badly or forgotten everything. But many national and international institutions sometimes used one term and sometimes the other. The two categories were inevitably mixed up, as some people had received little schooling, whereas others had acquired knowledge elsewhere than at school. Finally, there are many different levels between a complete lack of proficiency in basic skills and total proficiency. Writing a simple message phonetically or working out what a sign means are significant skills compared to total ignorance. For this reason, measuring illiteracy and comparisons between countries are difficult, as results vary enormously according to the criteria used.

## The paradox of rich countries

In its 2009 Education for All Global Monitoring Report, UNESCO considers that the world literacy rate for adults has risen, increasing from 76% in the period 1985-1994 to 84% in 2000-2006. However, 776 million adults still lack minimum literacy skills. And this figure does not only concern poor countries. Despite official statistics that "generally underestimate" the phenomenon, by announcing, for example, a literacy rate of 99% in North America and in Europe, there are still pockets of illiteracy and of low literacy in developed countries.

The International Adult Literacy Skills Survey (IALSS), carried out from 1994 to 1998 • • •

• • • by the OECD and published in 2000, defined a scale of proficiency from 1 to 5, which was later used in other surveys. Level 1 designated the weakest skills and level 2 the ability to "get by" despite insufficient proficiency. But this survey sparked a controversy. While developed countries consider that 10% of their populations have serious difficulties with writing, this survey gave much higher figures, putting 45 % of the population of Great Britain and 40 % of the population of Germany at levels 1 and 2. France, which was also rated at 40%, withdrew from the survey.

In France, the subsequent use by the *Agence nationale de lutte contre l'illettrisme* (ANLCI) (National agency to combat illiteracy) of a survey about "information and daily life", carried out in 2004-2005 by l'*Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques* (INSEE) (National institute for statistics and economic studies) estimated, but with different criteria, that 9% of the population aged 18 to 65 who had studied in the country were illiterate. However, for 15 to 18-year olds, the rate is much lower: only 4.5%.

The IALSS survey was controversial, yet it had the positive effect of encouraging the countries concerned to implement plans to fight illiteracy and ask serious questions about the efficiency of their educational systems, which are now measured by the PISA surveys (Programme for international student assessment), published every three years by the OECD since the year 2000. On the other hand, IALSS was not followed up. The OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) is designed to make up for the lack of a common measurement tool, but its first assessments are not expected before 2011.

**Women at school, Timor-Leste.** © UNESCO/Katy Anis

## Netherlands: Reversing the trend

In 1994, another international adult literacy survey, (IALS), carried out in Canada, the United States, the Netherlands, Ireland, Germany, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland, already showed the complexity of the measurement criteria. On a scale of 1 to 5, it measured three categories of skills: understanding prose, "documents" and texts with quantitative information. In these three categories, 10% of the Dutch population was no higher than level 1.

According to the Lezen & Schrijven (Read & Write) foundation, created in 2004 and chaired by Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, 1.5 million Dutch people are at the lowest level of this scale, 1 million of whom were born and educated in the country. According to a survey by the foundation, a quarter of these are almost totally illiterate. Furthermore, 6% of salaried workers have major difficulties in reading and writing.

"Illiteracy", declared Princess Laurentien during a UNESCO regional conference in Baku (Azerbaijan) in May 2008, "is often linked to major personal problems – low self-esteem, social isolation and an inability to function independently". She concluded: "There is no silver bullet in eradicating illiteracy. We must work together to raise awareness, implement practical initiatives and measure actual results". All concerned countries are at this juncture today. ■

**Language education for Dutch-speaking adults at the Knowledge centre Literacy Dutchspeakers (KAN).** © UNESCO/Sake Rijpkema

continued from page 4

• • • France allocates only 12% of its total development assistance in this area and Germany just 7%. Multilateral aid frameworks for supporting Education for All, such as the EFA Fast Track Initiative, are also failing to meet expectations. Inadequate donor support means that countries with approved plans will face an FTI shortfall of US$2.2 billion by 2010.

The circumstances into which children are born, their gender, the wealth of their parents, their language or the colour of their skin should no longer define their educational opportunities and ending inequality's "lottery by birth" is perhaps one the greatest global challenges of the 21st century. The challenge is one that concerns all nations, since in a globalized world poverty and suffering do not remain confined within borders, but spill over in the form of conflict for scarce resources, mass migration and environmental degradation.

The response to the financial crisis demonstrates what governments can accomplish when faced with "extraordinary times". But if they carry on failing to tackle deep and persistent inequalities in education, targets set by the international community will be missed – in some cases by spectacular margins. Most importantly, millions of children around the world will continue to be consigned to lives of poverty and diminished opportunity. ■

*The UNESCO Courier* is published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
7, place de Fontenoy – 75352 Paris 07 SP, France

**General inquiries** by e-mail: courier.unesco@unesco.org

**Director**: Saturnino Muñoz Gómez
**Editor in Chief**: Jasmina Šopova
**French Editor**: Agnès Bardon
**English Editor**: Cathy Nolan
**Spanish Editor**: Araceli De Urbina
**Arabic Editor**: Bassam Mansour
**Russian Editors**: Irina Krivova
**Chinese Editor**: Weiny Cauhape
**Layout**: Marie Moncet
**Photo Editor**: Fiona Ryan
**Web Platform**: Stephen Roberts, Fabienne Kouadio, Chakir Piro

Articles and photos credited UNESCO may be reproduced and/or translated providing the credit line reads "Reproduced from the UNESCO Courier", and include date and hyperlink. Photos without UNESCO credit request specific authorization.

Articles express the opinions of the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of UNESCO.

Boundaries on maps do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by UNESCO or the United Nations of the countries and territories concerned. ISSN 1993-8616